

TO: House Committee on Education
FROM: Loren Naldoza
RE: HB 3435—School Meals for All
DATE: February 24, 2025



Chair Neron, Vice-Chair McIntire, Vice-Chair Dobson and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony in **strong support of HB 3435**, which would make much-needed investments to end food insecurity among Oregon’s students.

Oregon Food Bank’s mission is “to eliminate hunger and its root causes *because no one should be hungry.*” Yet one third more Oregonians experience hunger today than before the pandemic. Last year, we saw 2.5 million visits to our network of over 1,200 food assistance sites through the Oregon Food Bank Network—a 31 percent increase from the previous year.

The prevalence of food insecurity among youth is high.

Across the country, more than 13 million children live in households that experience hunger.¹ Today, 1 in 6 kids in Oregon and Southwest Washington experience some degree of food insecurity. This means that many households do not know where their next meal will come from.

Rising costs of food and housing are forcing families to make impossible decisions between putting a roof over their heads and putting food on the table. These difficult choices have resulted in bleak outcomes for thousands of families in our state. For example, an estimated 22,000 children enrolled in Oregon’s school districts—approximately 3.9 percent of all students in the state—experienced homelessness.²

We can address food insecurity by ensuring that, at the very least, a meal is guaranteed at school, particularly when their primary focus is to learn. Our students deserve to be put on a level playing field as they learn. When some children cannot afford breakfast or lunch and—as a result—are hungry in the classroom, they are not on a level playing field. Among other jurisdictions that have expanded school meal programs that guarantee meals to their students, there have been no shortage of benefits:

¹ Rabbitt, M. et al., *Household Food Security in the United States in 2023*, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Sep. 4, 2024, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details?pubid=109895>.

² Holcomb Spurbeck, F., et al., “2024 Oregon Statewide Homelessness Estimates,” Portland State University Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative (Jan. 2025) at 52. See also SchoolHouse Connection, “Infant & Toddler Homelessness Across 50 States: 2021–2022” (Mar. 20, 2024), <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/infant-and-toddler-homelessness> (estimated total population of Oregon children aged 0–3 experiencing homelessness is 5,392, or 3.31 percent of all infants and toddlers).

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- Students improved in academic achievement, including on standardized tests;
- Overall attendance improved, which is in itself linked to academic achievement;
- Students experienced reduced rates of food insecurity, a common link to poor academic outcomes;
- There is an overall improvement in nutrition, such as by increasing the consumption of fruits and vegetables;
- There is an overall improvement in physical, mental, and emotional health.
- Tiered eligibility systems that limited participation for too many children whose families are struggling to make ends meet were eliminated;
- School meal debt became a thing of the past;
- Administrative burdens required to operate school nutrition programs were significantly reduced.³

The State of Oregon has a critical role to play in supporting the health and education of our children, especially for children whose households have low incomes. Offering meals to all students at no charge ensures that every child in Oregon has access to essential nutrition and, by extension, the resources needed to excel in school and beyond.

Oregon Food Bank urges you to support HB 3435.

Loren Naldoza
Oregon Food Bank

³ Food Research & Action Center, *The Case for Healthy School Meals for All*, June 2021, <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/SchoolMealsForAll.pdf>.

